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ABSTRACT

To investigate whether political assertions were interjected into American sports coverage of the 1984 Olympic games and which direction those assertions took, a study examined the Los Angeles Times' coverage of the games in its award-winning special supplement sections. The "Times" included these special supplements in its papers from July 22, six days before the games began, to August 14, one day after the Olympic games concluded. All stories that were greater than four square inches, including all graphics and headlines, were examined. Each of the 899 stories was coded for the date, page, headline, square column inches, graphics, source of story, type of sport(s), primary nation-actor(s), whether the story contained political assertions, and whether it was treated as a standard sports-news story, feature, or column. It was found that the large majority of stories did not contain political assertions. Nevertheless, among those stories that did interject political assertions into sports coverage, most of the assertions evaluated the impact of the Soviet-led boycott of the Olympic games, suggesting that the boycott was politically successful. (HOD)

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SPORTS AND POLITICS:

LOS ANGELES TIMES' COVERAGE OF THE 1984 SUMMER OLYMPICS GAMES

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SPORTS AND POLITICS:
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The last two Olympic games in Moscow and Los Angeles have made clear that sports and politics are not easily separable. Media coverage of both sports and politics may emphasize conflict and animosity.[1] But the Olympic games, so the notion goes, should foster amity among peoples and nations. This research examined whether the American news media reported the 1984 summer Olympic games in Los Angeles in a political manner by inserting political interjections into sports coverage.

It is taken as axiomatic that a nation's media will report the news in a manner that conforms to the political system in which they function.[2] But this hypothesis, when it has been empirically tested at all, has usually been tested with developing nations, communist nations, or authoritarian nations.[3] When American or other Western news media were examined at all in this body of research, they were generally used as a model or standard for what "objective," "fair," or "balanced" news coverage should be like.[4] For instance, political scientist Baruch Hazan examined Soviet news media control of the 1980 Moscow Olympic games and argued that the Soviet news media manipulated the coverage to further their political goals. He warned that "democratic regimes, unable to control mass media..., are seldom a match for authoritarian states' propaganda apparatus."[5]

Even though many observers have chastised the United States and the Soviet Union for transforming the 1980 and 1984 Olympic games into propaganda events, no precedents were set. Sporting events, including the Olympic games themselves, have served propaganda purposes many times in the past. Hitler's "Nazi Olympics" in Berlin in 1936 and the

black American athletes raising clenched fists in Mexico City in 1968 make clear how the Olympic games have long served as a forum for international politics. As Finley and Pleket wrote in their historical analysis of the Olympic games:

> What we choose to think about sport in the modern world has to be worked out and defended from modern values and modern conditions. Harking back to the ancient Greek Olympics has produced both bad history and bad arguments. International games foster international amity — that has been one of the favorite historical arguments. But no one said that in antiquity; so far as they thought in those terms at all, they said the opposite.6

Even though the hypothesis that a nation's news media will reflect the political system in which they function has been accepted as axiomatic, it appears that researchers do not believe that the hypothesis can be generalized equally in all societies. It is believed that the news media in communist systems, where in theory the news media are owned and operated by the state, will be more likely to report information in line with government policies than the news media in libertarian/ social responsibility systems, where in theory the news media are independently owned.[7] For instance, Boyd, in his study of the flow of information between the two Germanies, found that the East German telecasts into West Germany were far more propagandistic than the West German broadcasts into East Germany.[8] Though West Germany sent little blatant propaganda to East Germany, Boyd suggested that the propaganda messages from West to East may have been more subtle and intertwined with other messages. Thus, even though the news media in Western nations are often independently

owned, the media and journalists in Western nations may be so dependent on the free market economic system that they may reflect Western values.[9] This notion of the relationship between the political system and journalists' socialization maintains that Western journalists "are imbued with implicit and explicit ideological referents which consistently lead to the production of messages emphasizing particular norms, values, and sanctions."[10] Despite this recognition of journalists' socialization into the dominant culture, the dominant view seems to be that communist press systems will not merely reflect governmental policies; they will frequently be official mouthpieces for state policies.[11] The Soviet Union is straightforward in its view that the Soviet news media should function to explain the news to the world and to the people of the Soviet Union in a manner that corresponds with state policy and counteracts what it sees as lies being reported about the Soviet Union in the Western news media. As one scholarly Soviet publication reported:

> Bourgeois propaganda doesn't hesitate to use lies and slander to discredit socialist society to undermine the sociopolitical and ideological unity of Soviet society. Therefore the molding of class consciousness of the working people, an unmerciful struggle against bourgeois ideology, acquires special significance today. Vigorous rebuff to anti-Sovietism and anticommunism is a constant direction of the activities of the Party committees and the mass media. We need a well-considered single system of counter-propaganda, a dynamic and effective one.12

When one considers that the stated function of the Soviet mass media is to serve as mouthpieces for state policies, it came as no surprise when Hazan and Maitre, in their individual content analyses of Soviet news media coverage of the 1980 Moscow Olympic games, found

that the Soviet news media reported the American-led boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympic games in a manner that conformed to the Soviet Union's political policies.[13] Hazan found that the Soviet news media led a campaign to explain the boycott for what the boycott was not "really" about ---the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The Soviet news media --- like the Soviet government --- refused to accept President Carter's explanation that the boycott was a Western reaction to the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. In terms of the boycott's impact, the Soviet news media stressed that the boycott was a failure and the games were a success.[14]

In democratic societies, however, the news media are not meant to serve as mouthpieces for the government. Even if it is true that journalists are socialized into the dominant culture, journalistic norms such as fairness and objectivity are meant to permit opposing views to be aired in the news media. As such, Western news media hold themselves to higher standards of truthfulness, fairness, and objectivity. In a democratic society, the news media are supposed to serve such important societal functions as: 1) surveillance of the social and political environments, 2) correlation of the social and political environments, 3) transmission of the social heritage, and 4) entertainment.[15] Thus, when history repeated itself and the Soviet Union led a boycott against the Los Angeles Olympic games in 1984, it seemed worthwhile to replicate earlier research conducted on Soviet news coverage of the 1980 Olympic games in Moscow and examine how the American news media fared by comparison. Therefore, we tested two hypotheses:

1) that American news media coverage of sporting events during the 1984 summer Olympic games in Los Angeles would be generally political, and

2) during those times when political assertions may have crept into the coverage, the coverage would not be consistently pro-American, since the American news media are not owned and operated mouthpieces for state policies. It would not be surprising, however, if the American news media reflect some pro-Western biases since Western journalists have been socialized into the dominant culture.

METHOD

In order to investigate whether political assertions were interjected into American sports coverage of the 1984 Olympics games, and which direction those assertions took, the special Olympic games sports sections of the Los Angeles Times were examined. The Times included these special supplements in its papers from July 22, six days before the games began, to August 14, one day after the Olympic games concluded. The Times was selected for content analysis because it is located in the city where the Olympic games were held, it cared enough about the event to carry a special sports supplement each day devoted to the event, and it is regarded as a prestigous American daily newspaper.[16]

All stories appearing in the special section that were greater than four square inches, including all graphics and headlines, were examined. Excluded from coding was all tabular matter such as schedules, calendars, results, and listings. Each story was coded for the date, page, headline, square column inches, graphics, source of story, type of sport(s), primary nation-actor(s), and whether the

story was treated as a standard sports-news story, feature, or column. Each story was also coded for whether it contained political assertions. An assertion was defined as a "sentence or group of words that create a complete thought with subject, verb, object. A sentence may contain more than one assertion."[17] Coders were instructed to define "political assertions" as "statements dealing with relations between or among nations on matters dealing with policy, diplomacy, politics, and social and economic matters." There were three categories of political assertions: 1) those dealing exclusively with U.S.-Soviet relations, 2) those dealing with nations other than the U.S.-Soviet relationship (although the United States and/or the Soviet Union may appear together in this category), and 3) those dealing with political issues rather than nations. The categories were not mutually exclusive.

During a pre-test of four randomly selected issues to check the instrument for inter-coder reliability and three issues to check for intra-coder reliability, coders were instructed to code or re-code all assertions for their direction of favorability from the viewpoint of the United States. Thus, a positive assertion would be favorable to the United States and a negative assertion would be unfavorable to the United States. However, the pre-test showed that coders had difficulty coding by direction for the categories dealing with "other nations" and "political issues." For instance, with the issue of apartheid, coders argued that many of the attacks against apartheid could be construed as negative from a United States viewpoint since the United States is an ally of South Africa and many of these criticisms were coming from authoritarian nations unfriendly to the United States. But they also argued that most Americans would agree

that apartheid was repugnant. As a result, coding by direction was only carried out with those political assertions dealing with the U.S.-Soviet relations, where inter- and intra-coder agreement was sufficiently high. The coefficient of intercoder reliability for what constituted assertions dealing with U.S-Soviet relations was 0.87, and 0.92 for direction.[18] Direction of coding was conducted in a manner suggested by Budd, Thorp, and Donohew:[19] Unqualified favorable (+2), where the assertion was clearly favorable from an American viewpoint; qualified favorable (+1), where the assertion was favorable to the United States but gave some credence to the opposing view; qualified unfavorable (-1); unqualified unfavorable (-2); and balanced or neutral (0). All other political assertions in the "other nations" and "political issues" categories were recorded for what nation or nations and issue or issues were reported.

FINDINGS

A total of 899 stories were examined. The importance of the Olympic games to The Times was exemplified by the fact that the newspaper primarily relied its own staff rather than news syndicates to gather the stories. Over 90 percent of the stories were attributed to staff reporters or from The Times without a reporter byline. The mean story length (excluding those under 4 square column inches) was 97.5 square inches. In addition, 66 percent of the stories were accompanied by one or more graphics.

Forty-three different sporting events were reported. More than 100 nations were reported, but most of the reporting focused on the United States and other Western nations. Coders reported up to three major nation-actors in each story. The United States was reported as

a major actor-nation in 578 of the stories (51 percent). The other most-reported nations were West Germany (n=61), Romania (n=46), China (n=46), Italy (n=44), Canada (n=43), United Kingdom (n=42), the Soviet Union (n=28), South Korea (n=24), Japan (n=23), and France (n=23). Despite the overall dominance of Western nations, other nations such South Korea and Romania also made the list. These nations were often mentioned in a political manner. South Korea is scheduled to host the 1988 summer Olympic games, and there is some question as to whether the 1988 Olympics will be boycotted by the Soviet Union and other East bloc nations. Romania was the only East bloc nation that defied the Soviet boycott. The Soviet Union was a major actor-nation in many of the stories even though its athletes did not participate in the Olympic games. These stories with the Soviet Union as a major actor often concerned speculation of the outcome of sporting events had the Soviets participated and references to past Olympic games. In addition, other nations such as Cuba and East Germany were sometimes major actor-nations in stories.

The first research hypothesis, which stated that most of the coverage would be apolitical, was supported. Almost 84 percent of the stories (n=753) did not contain any political assertions. But the major hypothesis concerning the direction of U.S.-Soviet assertions was rejected. Although we did not expect American news coverage to be blatantly political and propagandistic, as past research showed Soviet coverage of the 1980 Moscow Olympic games to be, we expected the coverage to be at least subtly biased in a pro-Western direction. Not only was The Times' coverage not favorable to the United States, it was generally unfavorable. The mean direction for the 177 U.S.-Soviet

assertions was -0.15. Though the mean was only slightly unfavorable toward the United States, the fact that the mean was negative at all led us to perform a post-hoc analysis of the assertions to try to explain this finding. It should be noted, however, that "unfavorable," as it was coded here, does not necessarily equate with anti-American. The post-hoc analysis, in fact, made that point clear.

The post-hoc qualitative analysis of the U.S.-Soviet assertions revealed that 113 (64 percent) of these assertions dealt specifically with events surrounding the Los Angeles games, such as Soviet media coverage of the games (or lack of it), judging bias, reasons for the boycott, and comparison of these games with the 1980 Moscow Olympic games. The other 64 stories (36 percent) dealt with other matters not directly related to the Los Angeles games, such as the possibility of future boycotts, discussion of the 1980 boycott by the United States and its allies in the Moscow Olympic games, and matters dealing with war and peace.

What was particularly interesting was that in 95 of the 113 U.S.-Soviet assertions dealing specifically with the 1984 Olympic games, The Times' coverage focused exclusively on intepreting the success or failure of the boycott in discrediting the Olympic games. Only six of these assertions were neutral. The mean direction for these assertions was -0.44. According to The Times, more often than not the Soviet-led boycott was a successful in discrediting the success of the games, particularly in discrediting America's success in hosting the games and America's success in individual sporting event victories.

Most of the assertions suggested that the boycott was successful because without the appearance of the Soviet Union or its allies at the games, the United States faced no serious competition. Some

typical negative assertions, often interjected into the reporting took this form:

"The Soviet-led boycott has taken the heart out of the Olympic men's volleyball competition."

"The United States is dominating the medal race in an Olympics much diluted by the boycott."

"Weightlifting is perhaps the sport that was hurt the most by the East bloc boycott."

"An Olympic games volleyball tournament without the USSR is like the hurdles without Edwin Moses. It just won't be the same."

"As virtually every post-mortem has noted, the absence of the Soviet Union stripped the tournament of drama."

Some typical assertions that were positive took this form:

"Nobody really missed the Soviets except for a few of the European dressage riders."

"Fifteen nations boycotted the Olympics, but most people didn't seem to care."

"One reason why the Soviet propaganda campaign against the games has become so shrill is that the Soviets realize what a success is in the offing."

Thus, what was coded as negative coverage of the United States was not necessarily anti-American coverage. In fact, it can be argued that it was quite the opposite. The only thing that was negative about the coverage was the press' warning that America was obtaining negative results in its efforts to win the propaganda war with the Soviets. The Times, it appears, was engaging in the classic correlation function of the press described by Lasswell and others which involves more than just presenting information but also

interpreting the implications of the Soviet-led boycott. Even though we did not enter this study intending to find this interpretation of negative news, the coders were in agreement that this is what they viewed as news reporting that was negative toward the United States or positive toward the Soviet Union. In retrospect, it should not be unusual that a sporting event tinged with politics should be viewed within a "who's winning and who's losing" framework by the readers.

Even though the pre-test demonstrated that the direction of coverage concerning the reporting of "other nations" and "political issues" would not have been a reliable measure, the nominal measurement of political assertions dealing with other nations and political issues interjected into the reporting was revealing. A total of 83 assertions referred to nations other than the United States and the Soviet Union together. The United States and the Soviet Union may have been mentioned in this category, but not in relationship to each other. The nations mentioned most often were the United States (n=23), Romania (n=13), the Soviet Union (n=12), China (n=10), Taiwan (n=6), Israel (n=4), Cuba (n=3), South Africa (n=3) and the United Kingdom (n=3). The domination of this list by nations that are frequently covered in political terms in Western news coverage shows that sports cannot be easily divorced from politics. Romania was the only East European nation that refused to participate in the Soviet-led boycott. As such, it received praise from The Times for its decision to participate in the Olympic games. China also did not participate in the boycott. It received similar praise. Taiwan was mentioned in reference to its own regional political problems concerning recognition as China. South Africa was mentioned in

reference to apartheid and racism. Cuba was mentioned in reference to its joining the boycott. Israel was mentioned in reference to terrorism and the possibility of violence at the Olympic games. Several stories harked back to the 1972 Munich massacre of Israeli athletes by Palestinian terrorists.

A total of 55 assertions addressed political issues. These were coded as racism (including apartheid, n=14), Olympic boycotts (n=12), politics in the Olympic games (n=9), nationalism (n=8), terrorism (n=7), commercialism of the games (n=3), and matters dealing with peace and war (n=2).

DISCUSSION

This study of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic games as it was reported in the special Olympic supplements of The Los Angeles Times showed that politics cannot be divorced from sports. The analysis revealed that many political assertions were interjected into sports coverage, most of which referred to the U.S.-Soviet relationship. The Soviet Union was a major actor in many of the stories, even though the it boycotted the Olympic games. But, contrary to the initial research hypothesis, most of the political assertions interjected into the sports coverage dealing with the United States and the Soviet Union were unfavorable to the United States. By unfavorable, it appeared that the coders interpreted unfavorable coverage as America's inability to counter the Soviet-led boycott. Unfavorable did not necessarily mean anti-American. Though we did not expect to find the type of blatant and consistent political propaganda that past research showed was reflected in the communist nations' coverage of the of

Olympic games, we did expect to find at least some --- perhaps subtle --- pro-American coverage in The Times. A post-hoc, qualitative analysis of the assertions revealed that the majority of these assertions dealt with evaluations of the relative political success or failure of the Soviet-led boycott. Concerning those stories where political assertions were interjected, the reporters generally viewed the Olympic games as an international propaganda war between the United States and the Soviet Union, and, in the reporters' overall estimation, the Soviet Union won that war. The study also examined the interjection of political assertions dealing with nations outside the U.S.-Soviet relationship and political issues that were interjected into the coverage.

The prestigous newspaper examined here interjected political assertions into standard sports coverage. It is not surprising that a prestigous newspaper that covers national and international politics would note and comment on the political implications surrounding the boycott. And rather than simply report the political implications, it felt the need to interpert the political implications of the boycott. The Times reported that overall the Soviet-led boycott was successful in undermining the Los Angeles Olympic games. This would seem to be in stark contrast to television coverage of the boycott. One recent study of television coverage of the 1984 Olympics argued that television treated the games as one of those great media events such as the moon landing or Sadat's trip to Jerusalem where the nation could collectively celebrate. As a result, "(television) journalists drop their usually cynical attitudes and disinterested language; their attitude takes on a reverential air...."[21] It may be that only television drops its usual journalistic routines when reporting

celebrated media events. Newspapers may continue to look at the negative side of such events.

The unusual marriage of sports and politics led The Times to interpret even the outcome of sporting events in political terms. Many American victories were not seen as victories at all because the Soviet Union and its allies boycotted the games. As a result, the Soviet Union was viewed as successful in eliminating effective competition and thereby discrediting the Olympic games and the American victories. The media may have been attempting to warn that despite the American public's excitement over the Olympic games, this was not a great American coup that it appeared to be. They suggested that it was clear to all observers — including other nations — that the Soviet Union won the propaganda war, and that the United States is not prepared to deal with Soviet propaganda methods. While in all likelihood the Soviet Union did boycott the Olympic games for political reasons, this extension of interpreting that political ploy to interpreting even the outcome of sporting events in a political context may have led to an overemphasis on the political theme. One of the West's main criticisms of the Soviet media is that they interpret too many events in a political context. The American media may have been guilty of that same criticism during the Los Angeles Olympic games.

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This study examined The Los Angeles Times' coverage of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic games in the newspaper's award-winning special Olympics supplement section with a special focus on political assertions that were interjected into the coverage. It was found that the large majority of stories did not mention political assertions. Nevertheless, among those stories that did interject political assertions into sports coverage, most of the assertions dealt with U.S.-Soviet relations. Specifically, most of the assertions evaluated the impact of the Soviet-led boycott of the Olympic games. It was found that most of the assertions tended to suggest that the Soviet-led boycott was politically successful.

It was suggested that the newspaper performed the correlation function of the media; that is, it did not simply perform the function of providing information about the games or the boycott (surveillance), but rather it interpreted the implications of the Soviet-led boycott. By saying the newspaper reported negative coverage of the Olympics was not to say the coverage was anti-American; it may have been quite the opposite. The newspaper sought to warn about the dangers of the boycott to Americans. From other research it was suggested that perhaps television might not have covered the event in such an interpretive fashion.

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